

AKRON APOSTOLIC TEMPLE

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS WITHIN THE GOSPEL: APPLICATIONS,
CONFLICTS, AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE AKRON APOSTOLIC TEMPLE WEBSITE
ARCHIVES

BY

JAMES M. POPE

FAIRLAWN, OHIO

APRIL 30, 2007

I. DEFENSE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

As a Sunday school teacher who often uses elements of Christian ethical frameworks within lesson plans, it is this writer's duty to make Jesus Christ the focus of the presentation. Many would find it difficult to receive the message of ethics in this writer's worship assembly without mentioning the name of Jesus Christ or the scriptures that one could turn to find ethics actually being applied. It is on the basis of scripture that Christian ethics can be viewed and honored in a traditional worship setting. Perhaps there are some within the congregation who feel that ethics should not be taught, but the scriptures alone. Let us take in consideration that this writer's teaching methods are deemed controversial to some, the case would have to be made that Christian ethics is a part of the gospel of Christ. This approach would seek to eliminate criticism on behalf of those who think that Christian ethics is something new or foreign to the teachings of the church.

A. DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Christian ethics is the ability to follow through on what is perceived as righteous by Jesus Christ. The Christian framework on what is deemed right is not defined by a system or set of principles. Instead our ethics are derived from the person of Jesus Christ. Knowledge of who he is in our individual lives demands ethical responses that must be carried out in order to adhere to the realistic implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Once the gospel is preached, our particular responses call for personal action.

B. RESPONSE TO THREE AREAS OF CRITICISM

Often within the community of faith one is called upon to apply current examples of thought and action in light of the gospel of Christ. As a seminary student one is taught

how to pinpoint the original content and context of a particular scripture. We are often encouraged to explain a thorough explanation of the happenings of another time and culture. In doing so we must never forget our current culture in whose presence we are speaking. The teaching of Christian ethics allows us as teachers to bridge the teachings of Christ from one culture and context to another.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS ARE INTRINSIC TO SCRIPTURE

In our first example there arises a leader who thinks that ethics are irrelevant to the church's main responsibilities. It is assumed that this individual has come to this conclusion because he thinks that Christian ethics have nothing to do with scripture. This writer believes that the whole purpose of studying scripture is to apply biblical teachings to one's life for the purpose of affecting one's ethical framework. The scriptures that deal with the prohibition of stealing mean little to the individual reading them if it is not applied into one's personal ethical framework. It is the Sunday school teacher's responsibility to properly teach the relevancy of being honest and not stealing in 1400 BCE and making it applicable in 2007 CE. This writer does not see any harm in mentioning one's ethical structure during the process of changing it, seeing that this is the purpose of teaching biblical studies to begin with. In fact, the same leader who opposes the teaching of ethics has probably already unknowingly sought to inspire it by merely teaching biblical principles anyway.

TEACHING ETHICS IS PRODUCTIVE

In our second example there are others who feel that teaching ethics may be unproductive and divisive for the church. Perhaps if this writer was to teach generic ethics as opposed to Christian ethics without the mention of any biblical contexts there would be a problem. Yet, this writer does feel that the presentation of Christian ethics within a Sunday school classroom is highly productive because it challenges students to apply biblical principles to contemporary thought. This approach would not be divisive because it would allow people to think for themselves in light of the scripture. Perhaps there will be views that divide congregants on a position or a stance, but ultimately such a presentation seeks to bring them closer spiritually because now each individual is seeking to provide biblical reasoning to a current societal problem.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL AND SAVING SOULS

One could bring into question the definition of what it means to be saved. This writer feels that it is necessary to be instrumental in reaching that unsaved soul by using the teaching of ethics. In fact it would rather be difficult to preach a spirit led sermon without calling on a soul to make a change ethically. The scriptures are riddled with great personalities who have preached because there needed to be a great change of heart, emotion, motive, and ethic.

II. EVERY THEOLOGICAL CLAIM HAS MORAL IMPLICATIONS

It is this writer's belief that every statement in scripture dealing with the study of God has moral implications. They cannot be separated. In its very nature every command, promise, prophecies, or mention of the covenant has an intrinsic underlying

theme of what an individual should be doing morally. What does this prove? By showing that every theological claim is linked to moral action this writer intends to present how important it is to internalize scripture and carry these biblical principles out personally. The word of God is not isolated from us. The very same principles that were being conveyed thousands of years ago still carries relevancy and meaning to us today.

MONOTHEISTIC WORSHIP

The worship of one God is something that has made unique the Hebrew people as well as Christians in today's society. The calling on of people to seek the mind and will of one God carries in itself a moral standard that is distinguished from people who serve diverse gods. If a man or woman believes in polytheistic worship then their loyalties are severed between two wills. Every moment of servitude that is given to one deity means that there is a moment that the other deity is left unfulfilled. According to Jesus in Matthew 6.24a, no man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.

IMPLICATION #1

The prophet Isaiah when speaking to the people of God stated in Isaiah 44v.8, "Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared *it?* ye *are* even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, *there is* no God; I know not *any*." Here, what the worshipper is called to do is to have faith and belief that there is only one God. Unlike other nations who serve a different god according to each specific

need, the people of God are automatically called upon to produce faith and reliance on the distinct word of God.

IMPLICATION #2

In Isaiah 42v.8 concerning God, the prophet declares, “*I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.*” The claim for monotheistic worship runs a bit tighter in this scripture. Here, the reader is forced to acknowledge that God will not give his glory to another. It would not be lawful for one to receive praise for something that only God has done. God doesn’t share his glory. In contemporary times perhaps it would be equivalent to trademarks or copyright claims. It would be wrong to declare that this writer has founding information from himself when in actuality the source of the information really came from someone else. This form of plagiarism is not only dishonest in today’s society, but it was wrong in Isaiah’s culture as well concerning God.

THE CHURCH IS CALLED OUT OF THE WORLD

As Christians we are called to a higher standard of living and a higher ethical framework as well. While the current societal rules judge individuals for engaging in bodily harm one to another, the Christian is called by God to not even have this form of anger. While society views adultery as dishonest, it is Jesus who says that if one looks at another with lust in one’s heart, he/she commits adultery already. What we will see is that the Christian actually must abide by a higher set of principles simply by observing theological claims that focus on a righteous God.

IMPLICATION #1

The apostle Paul when writing to the church at Corinth commands them to come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you.¹ This implies that by claiming to be a Christian, one was called to separate oneself from unbelievers. By doing so they must distinguish themselves from their ungodly society by their new code of ethics. This can only be done through what an individual does and how an individual thinks.

IMPLICATION #2

Peter declares in chapter 1 verse 16 for believers to be holy because God is holy. This is the classical structure for receiving a moral implication from a theological claim. God is holy therefore because of it his people ought to be holy. Being holy cannot be capsulated by just one work or one action. Being holy calls on the believer to produce a series of contingent and righteous actions produced by the holiness that they themselves have received from God.

THE MESSIAH WILL COME

The Hebrew people as a whole were given certain promises that a messiah would come and bring peace with his reign. The prophets in the Hebrew canon foretold of one who would come and let the oppressed go free. The irony involved with such a promise is that many of those who awaited a messiah to undo a certain level of oppression were the very ones oppressing others. In reality the mention of the coming of the messiah meant that the hearers ought to be ready for his reign. It is with this thinking that two implications arise.

¹ 1 Corinthians 6 verse 17 (KJV)

IMPLICATION #1

According to Daniel chapter 9 v. 25 there would one day be a messiah who does away with one kingdom or society and seeks to build another. The one hearing these words is called upon to prepare for such a change. One cannot be prepared for a just messiah if he/she is unjust. This prophetic statement actually calls on the hearer to seek a better ethical framework as well.

IMPLICATION #2

Jesus Christ finally did come to his people and did seek to bring a righteous order with his messianic reign. Mark 1vv.14-15 reads, “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”² It was no longer the people waiting for a messiah, but now the messiah is in fact waiting for the people. The Jewish people were now called upon, within this context, to change their ways.

THERE WILL BE A DAY OF JUDGMENT

Most of the aspects of biblical events have already passed. However, there are yet some events that are yet to occur. One of such is the Day of Judgment. It is during this time that everyone from all walks of life who have lived on the earth will be judged. Every action, thought, and motive will be called into question by Jesus Christ.

IMPLICATION #1

² Mark 1 verses 14,15 (KJV)

Jesus stated that, “Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.”³ The mention of a day of judgment also brings to question the current actions of men and women. What will God judge? Every word and will be placed under the spotlight of God’s inspection. The mention of a day of judgment demands that one aligns their current moral activity with the will of God that is found in scripture.

IMPLICATION #2

According to I Timothy 5.24, “Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some *men* they follow after.” There will be a day of judgment where sin is actually judged. Regardless if the sin is publicly acknowledged or if the sin is private, it will be judged by God. The one acknowledging judgment must also acknowledge his/her present day ethics.

III. THREE MAIN ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

There are three frameworks from class that this writer feels worthy to mention. The frameworks include deontology, utilitarianism, and egoism. Immanuel Kant’s focus on deontology explained it as universal moral laws that must be followed at all times.⁴ For example, lying is always wrong and is always a sin. Even if one is harboring slaves who may be tortured and put to death upon the authority’s discovery, it would be justifiable to tell the authorities of their proper location when asked. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill presented the case for utilitarianism.⁵ This framework seeks the

³ Matthew 12 verse 26 (KJV)

⁴ Kyle D. Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality*. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville), 20-22.

⁵ Ibid, 27.

greater good for the greater number of people. The problem with this framework is that the greater numbers of people determine what the greater good is. Egoism would claim that the right thing to do is what is right for one's self.⁶ There was really no specific author who this writer felt solely founded these principles. Yet, out of the three this writer feels that egoism is the most plausible.

IV. BEING AN EFFECTIVE AND FAITHFUL MORAL GUIDE

In order to become a more effective guide, this writer first feels the need to commit to availability. It doesn't matter how talented one is with one's trade, if one is not available for service, there service is rendered useless. The second commitment that this writer must have in order to be more effective and become a faithful moral guide is to become more culturally relevant. In order to help someone it is only right to speak in ways that the person can understand and actually benefit from.

⁶ Ibid, 15-17.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fedler, K. D. *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.